

Ahlanders — a century old and just starting

Provo company celebrates 100 years of family business

By TRAVIS JACOBSEN

Daily Herald Business Editor

In a society of high-tech highways, fiberoptic networks and internet communication pathways, where is there room for the generations-old, family-owned business?

The partial answer to such a question lies in the hearts of Michael and Steve Ahlander, president and vice president, of Ahlander Wholesale Company, a century-old business located at 490 S. University Ave., Provo.

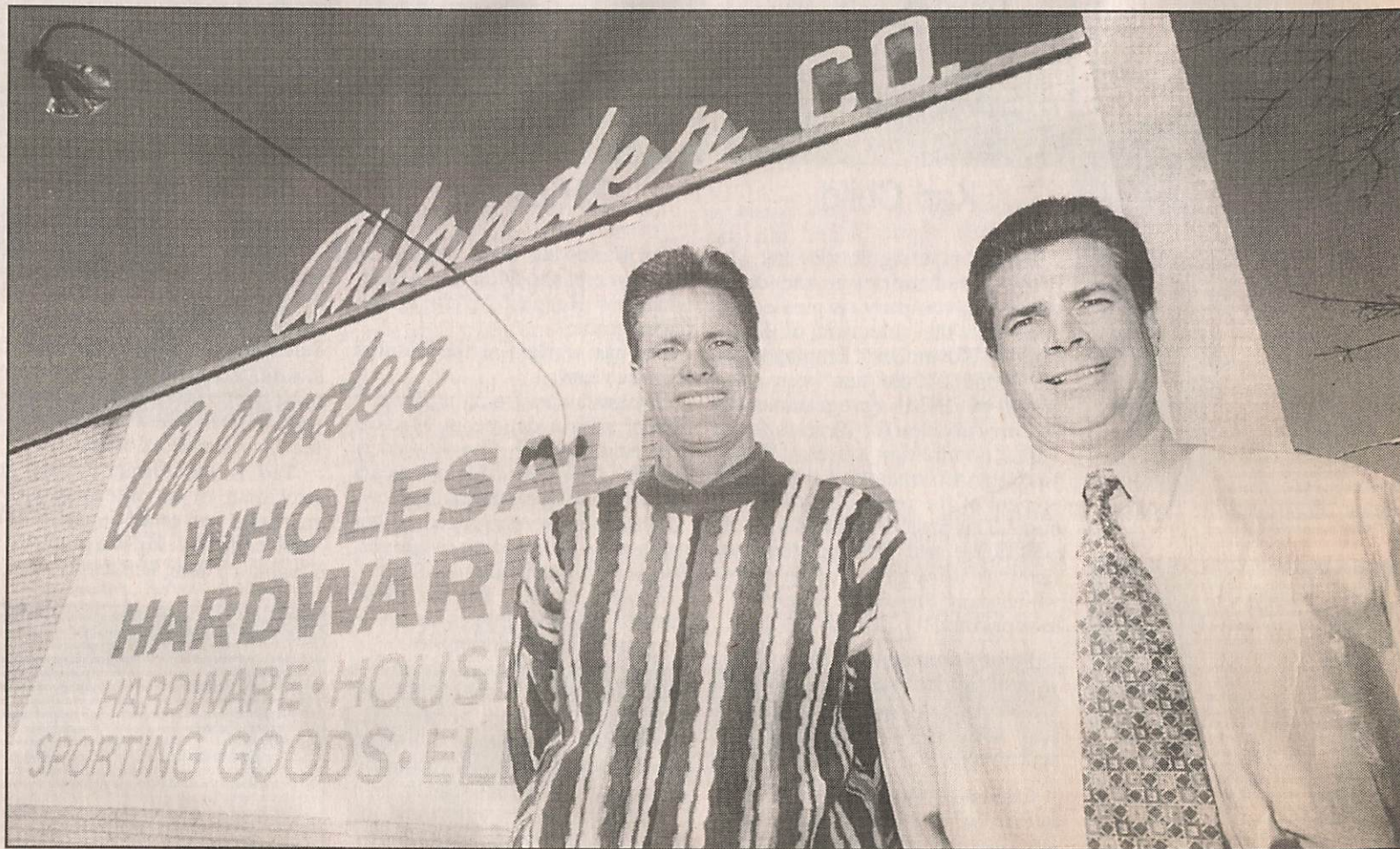
began making buggies in 1894, out of a different shop in south Provo. At that time Utah was not yet a state, and mass produced automobiles were only a dream to some future inventor.

Anders' business prospered as the years rolled by. Yet knowing that he could not shoulder alone the load of leading a successful business, he apprenticed his son Joseph Walter Ahlander to carry on the Ahlander tradition.

The pattern continued as father trained son to the family trade.

The established work ethic seemed hereditary as Joseph's son, Joseph Frederick Ahlander, found himself working in the shop and eventually becoming owner after retirement set in for Joseph Walter.

It was at that time that the family started somewhat of a traditional training process for the up-and-coming owner. Although the training was not a requirement for owning the family business, it conveyed a sense of loyalty and respect for the past and a determined drive to succeed in the future. It was in those days that the next owner started on the low



Daily Herald Photos/Matthew R. Smith

Steve Ahlander, left, and Michael B. Ahlander, vice president and president, respec-

ings of the business — sweeping er.

tively, stand outside their century-old, family-owned business. These two brothers

own the oldest business in Provo. They are fourth-generation owners of the company.

guards came an increase in addi- work and of adapting to the mar-

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celebrating the



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They are the the inheritors of a four-generation-old company that has survived the goods and bads

or business. This wholesale distributing company claims the honor as one of the oldest companies in Provo. And next to the Berg Mortuary, city records do not list another business with an earlier inception date.

Michael and Steve smile as they talk about their great-grandfather and all the other family members who have contributed to the family business since its beginnings in 1894.

It was their great-grandfather, Anders Frederick Ahlander, who

hung on the ladders by sweeping the company floors, filling orders and dusting the company's furniture.

"That's where it all began," states Michael Ahlander, 44, eldest son of Joseph Frederick Ahlander. "We were trained just as our father was trained, and just as his father trained him."

"It's not that those tasks were a requirement for owning the business, but in order to gain a respect for the trade and the legacy which built such a company, each son needed to understand the work-

and dusting seemed the appropriate initiatory tasks," stated Michael.

As the years turned into decades, the business "needed to evolve in order to survive," states Steve Ahlander, 35. The buggy, which gave way to the mass-produced automobile, could no longer be built on a competitive level. But Ahlanders was one step ahead of technology. With the increase of local trapping and hunting, the little family business developed what would seem to be the first camping trail-

er was fully equipped with a wash basin, deep freeze storage unit, cast iron stove, table for four, storage space under the camper, and most importantly, a comfortable double bed. The camper, named "Home On The Range," sold for a reasonable \$455 and could be ordered by phone — all one needed to do was dial 100.

The camper seemed to be the perfect innovation for the Utah County outdoorsman — every unit built was sold. And only recently did the Ahlander family recover an original "Sheep Camp," as they had come to be called.

In the height of its building days, Ahlanders was responsible for making Provo's first ambulance, fire engine and school bus.

Although the company has shifted the focus from building to its current emphasis in wholesale distributing, Ahlanders maintains the working values which have helped the company survive for so long.

And with each new owner came a change in products being made or distributed.

Ahlanders was originally called Ahlander Manufacturing Co. It then changed its name to Ahlanders Hardware store, and finally, its current name, Ahlander Wholesale Co — appropriately representing, as it has in all ages, the thrust of the company's business. The company is now, and has been for some time, dedicated to wholesale distributing. Any sporting good, hardware item or automotive part can be ordered from the Provo business.

With the changing of the

tional products handled by the company. And now, with the fourth generation holding the reigns, the Ahlander sons have tapped into an international market as changes and challenges are met and networks formed.

That seems to be the success of the Ahlander family company in general. The family business can and does change with the needs of the market. "Obviously, buggies can't make the company any money nowadays," states Steve.

At its current location on University Ave., Ahlanders distributes to most major sporting goods stores, hardware stores, warehouses and grocery stores in the Intermountain West. They currently ship goods to Nevada, Wyoming, Idaho, Montana and Utah. And with the passage of NAFTA and GATT, the company has moved into such foreign markets as China, Canada and Mexico.

With a little over \$3 million in sales last year alone, the Ahlanders have boosted their efforts to distribute more goods that reflect market needs. Therefore, electronics and housewares have become products of choice which now move through their more than 40,000-square-foot warehouse.

And what about the future? It is clear that the company is in good hands so far. Michael and Steve each have sons which have started sweeping the shop and dusting the furniture — apprentices are already being trained which will take the company into yet another century. The lessons of hard

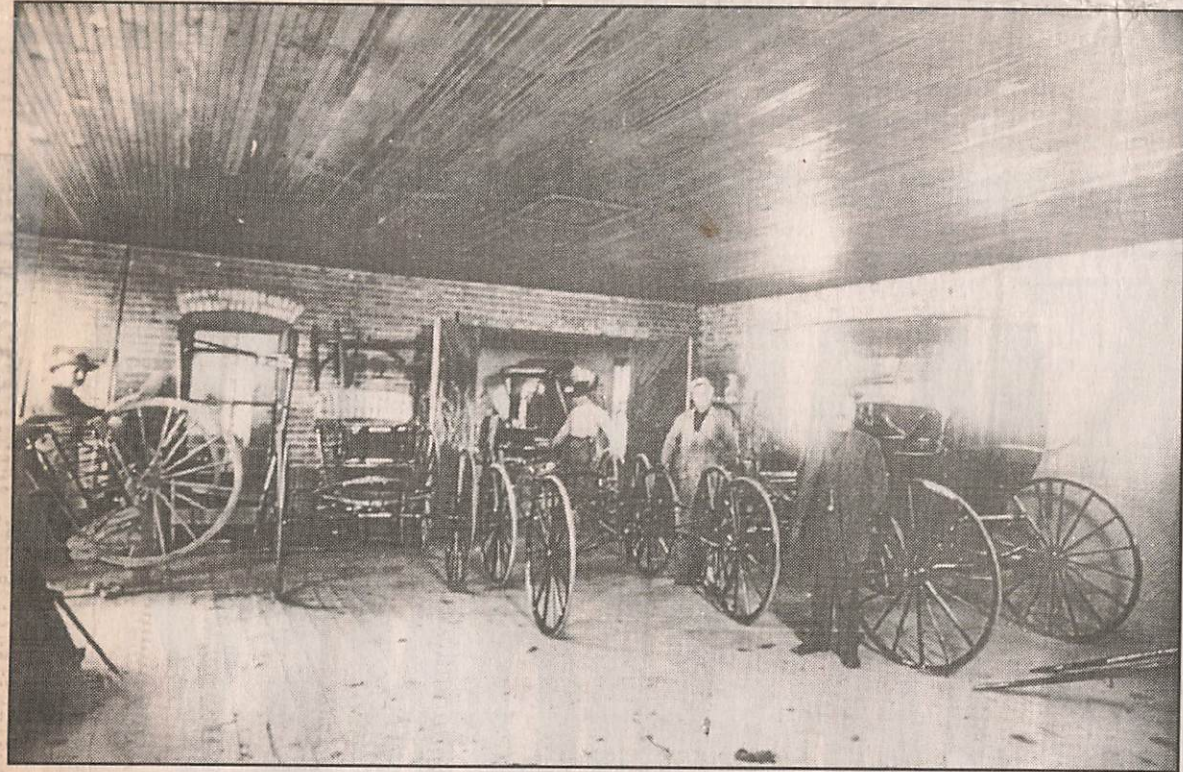
ket's needs are already being taught.

Hard work sets the tone for the family. In fact, Michael and Steve's mother, Elaine Ahlander, still keeps the finances for the business and participates in the workings of the family shop.

The Ahlanders indeed have a bent for the challenging. A family business doesn't often survive in this high-tech, networking world. There must be something taught, something shared from each generation, that pushes the business forward. Maybe it's all those days of sweeping, maybe not. But one thing is clear, Ahlanders can compete and survive as a successful distributing company right here in Provo, Utah. And as in most family businesses, the standard eight-hour day is but a lofty dream — "you often don't know what an eight-hour day is," states Michael. "But the rewards far outweigh the sweat and toil that accompany a family-owned business."

And what about the current owners of Ahlanders? Well, they don't consider themselves presidents or CEO's, they still sweep the floors, fill the orders and devote time to enjoying the heritage which has been endowed to them.

In celebration of a century of successful and dedicated service in the business community, Provo Mayor George O. Stewart and the Provo Economic Development Office recently presented Michael and Steve Ahlander with a plaque in recognition of their 100 years in business.



This turn-of-the-century photo depicts Ahlanders as it looked in 1894. The company became

famous for the quality of workmanship demonstrated in each buggy they produced.